
Discover your strengths

**Understanding University, the
Ultimate Uni Podcast - Episode 15**

Katie

Welcome to Understanding University, the Ultimate Uni Podcast. My name is Katie and I work for the University of Essex Outreach Team helping to deliver activities and events to support students and guide them on their higher education journeys. The outreach team believe that all students, regardless of their background, education or where they come from, should have an equal opportunity to discover whether Higher Education could be part of their future. Our podcast is designed to give listeners an insight into university life, including the journey before, during and after, dispel some of the myths out there and also motivate and excite you to achieve your potential. If you'd like to know more or have any questions please contact us by emailing outreach@essex.ac.uk

Today, we'll be delving into the importance of knowing your strengths and skills and how you can identify them. As you get older and progress throughout education, you'll notice how life gets slightly more competitive as you go on. Once you leave school, you have to apply for a college or a sixth form, which sometimes requires an interview and certain grades, and from there, whether you go to university, do an apprenticeship, an internship or work full time, you are required to complete an application or interview of some sort. To help make us stand out from other applicants and really showcase ourselves it's important that we are aware of our strengths and skills.

In today's episode, we are joined by Sarah, who will be helping us today to share tools to help identify our strengths so that we can realize what we are good at and therefore help with our decisions for our next steps, whether this is choosing a course, applying for a job or university. Welcome, Sarah, please introduce yourself and your role at the moment and perhaps a little bit about your educational pathway.

Sarah

Hi, Katie. Thank you so much for having me today. So, I am one of the outreach officers here at the University of Essex. So, like Katie, my work involves meeting students who are considering their future and helping them make informed decisions and identify the right path for them.

I came into this role from a teaching background. So, after school, I went to the University of Birmingham and I did a political science degree and after achieving my degree, I then went into teaching and I taught at the secondary school and I taught politics and citizenship there and I loved working with the students that I met and as I went on, I ended up being given the responsibility of all the university applications in the school that I worked at. So, I was in charge of helping students identify where they needed to go, helping them structure their personal statements and getting them into the universities where they wanted to end up or helping them in further applications to other pathways they were considering. It was there I then learned about the world of university and university outreach because I was working with outreach officers as a teacher, and I thought I would love to do that one day and eventually I moved into this sector. And yeah, personal statements, it's an excellent example of when you need to identify your strengths and skills in order

to make some kind of application which showcases you off in the best light possible and does you justice. So, that's why I'm speaking to you today.

Katie

Yeah, absolutely, thank you, Sarah. I'm really hoping that with all of your experience with students and working on personal statements that, we're going to get some really good content here today and help our listeners. So, let's start off then by identifying what are strengths and skills.

Sarah

Great, really, really good question Katie, because very often strengths and skills kind of get lumped together, but there is a little bit of difference here. And breaking down that difference will help you start to think about how you identify your strengths and skills. So, let's start off with skills. Skills are the things that you can generally work to learn to attain knowledge about, to develop some kind of aptitude with. So, if you think of when we talk about I.T. skills, when you're born you don't know how to use Microsoft Excel, you can't make a PowerPoint, you can't make a YouTube video. You can learn these things, these are skills that you attain that knowledge over a period of time, and you can become more proficient in with time, dedication and practice. So, they're kind of our typical skills, and then there are soft skills. So, I must admit, I'm not a big fan of the term soft skills because I think it makes them sound sometimes not as important as your general skills, like I.T. skills, writing skills, et cetera. Soft skills are things like organization and timekeeping, punctuality, multi-tasking. The kinds of things that actually you do take to day to day, and you can learn how to do these things, you can get better at doing these things, but they are absolutely essential in all walks of life. So that's skills, the kind of things you learn through practice and through dedication.

And then you've got your strengths, which are kind of like your character strengths. These are the things that make you, you and make you the kind of person that you are. And I don't want you to think about skills as something you can work on and you can't work on strengths, but your strengths might be the things that you find easier, they come very naturally to you. So, there are some people who can naturally stand up in front of an audience and talk and be completely happy and comfortable with that and others well they just go: "Nope, that's just not me. That's not my strength." They can do it, but it might take a little bit more effort. But then they will have other strengths, and these can be anything from, like I said, standing up and talking in front of an audience and that confidence, it can be patience, it can be determination, it can be listening to people. So, there's a whole range of these attributes that make you, you. And these are the things that you will use, whether it's in personal life or professional life. Does that answer your question?

Katie

Yes, that's great, Sarah. Thank you. And I know sometimes, it's partly why we're having this conversation, it's quite difficult sometimes to identify those. I was just wondering if you wouldn't mind just giving an example of perhaps one of your skills and one of your strengths. And we can go from there.

Sarah

Okay, so, it always feels really uncomfortable talking about yourself. But a skill, so, something that I've learned and developed – I am a very good skier. I didn't know if you knew that, that was a skill I learned when I was young. And yeah, that's a skill that I haven't needed in outreach work yet, but it is one of my skills. One of my character strengths, I'd like to think that I'm quite intuitive with other people, that I can maybe read people quite well, walk into a room, get a feeling of whether they're feeling good that day, maybe not so good that day, and kind of feed off that as to how to approach them and speak to them.

Katie

Thank you, Sarah. Because it is difficult sort of talking about yourself and I think for our listeners today, it'd be a really good opportunity to jot down notes whilst you're listening to get started straight away thinking about those skills and strengths, because it's not something that's easy to do, and I hope that you'll come away with some tools and techniques today as well to help you discover what you are potentially good at. So what can this help us with, by identifying these things, what can that help us with?

Sarah

There are some really positive things when we think about, actually, what are our strengths, it's not just about giving us an opportunity to write a good job application. First of all, it builds your self-awareness, it makes you more aware of who you are as a person and you learn by going through the process of thinking about what are my skills and strengths, you learn about yourself, how you think, and maybe even how others see you, which is something we might actually cover in this later on, thinking about how you can bring others into identifying your skills and strengths. And I think it helps you like yourself more, we find ourselves sometimes as human beings, we focus very much on the negatives and we focus on what we can't do and we focus on the negative experiences and we compare ourselves to others and we go: "well that person can do this, this and this, an icon". And we don't always spend enough time thinking about what we can do and what we are good at and what people like about us and what makes us an asset to our friendship group, our family, our workplace, at school. And when you actually stop and think, you come away with a bit of a feel good feeling, you go: "actually I'm going to cut myself some slack, I am a really decent, competent person" and I think there's that, that we shouldn't underestimate that, particularly when we consider our own well-being. And it also by identifying your strengths, it can help you identify things that you might need to work on and improve on and ways in which you can actually increase those strengths and skills. So, it helps you develop as a person in the long run and helps you to become the person that you want to be in order to achieve things you want to do in the future.

Katie

Thank you, Sarah. That's great, because that leads me on to sort of talking about or asking you about weaknesses as well. Why do you think it's good to know what you're not so good at as well?

Sarah

Exactly. And yeah, you can't talk about strengths without talking about weaknesses. And the first thing to point out is weaknesses are not negative, and I think sometimes people don't want to admit weaknesses

because they think, oh, no, that's not what people want to hear. I could just as well as I could tell you about some of my strengths, I could tell you loads of my weaknesses. We all have weaknesses. Sometimes I don't get up, and I don't get running out when I should because I want to stay in bed. And I could think, oh, no, maybe I'm not as dedicated as I could be. Sometimes I take on too much, I'm one of those people who can't say no to people, and I end up filling my plate so full that I then can't manage it. That's not a bad thing to recognize, because if I recognize I find it hard to say no, then I can look around for support to say, okay, what can I do to develop my confidence in how to say no to things? And what can I do to then make my life better, and that of the people around me because I'm so busy doing other bits and pieces, I'm not focusing maybe on some things that I should focus on.

So, by identifying your weaknesses, you can identify things you can work on to improve. And also, there are some things you may not want to improve. You go: "that's just not for me". I used an example earlier of somebody who can stand up and talk in front of people for hours on end with no problem, and the person who can't and the person who can't, they might not want to become that person. They may go: "that is just not for me, and I don't want to develop that.". But I know that maybe when I am thinking about a career path or university courses, I need to think about finding something that suits me. So, when I'm choosing a university course, I'll look at the assessment, and if the course at one university, maybe 40 percent of their assessment is based on presentations made to the rest of the cohort, then maybe that's not the right place for them. Maybe there's another place where you look at how a course is assessed and it's I don't know 70 percent on essays and 30 percent on exam and there's no standing up and talking in front of people. So, then they could choose that one and that would be better suited to their strengths and they're bound to be happier on that course as a result. So, it's not about kind of hiding your weaknesses and thinking they're a bad thing, it's identifying them so you can make the choices which are right for you or you can identify things that you can improve on and make your life happier and better as a consequence.

Katie

Yeah, really great points Sarah. The only thing I was going to add was that if you do feel like you want to maybe, perhaps challenge yourself with that weakness, there is a point of, sort of, stepping outside of your comfort zone but the more you do that, the more used to it you are and you're going to gain those skills and soon it won't even be something you worry about. So, you'll have even more strengths and skills, of course. And yes, it's just about you deciding which ones you're going to work on or perhaps like with the assessments, sort of checking which ones you'd be happy to do, and going from there. So, what should we focus more on then? Is it strengths or weaknesses or a bit of both?

Sarah

I think it's a bit of both, and I think it depends on the situation. So, if for example, you are writing your personal statement or you're writing your application to go to college, you're going to want to focus on your strengths as part of that process. So, when you're sitting down, and we will cover some of the ways you can do this, but when you're sitting down and you're thinking of content you're going to put into that application, you're going to sit and focus on your strengths, that's what that exercise involves. Maybe at a different point in the

year, maybe you've just got your report back from a teacher and your grades aren't as great as you hoped they would be or you want them to be, that's maybe the time you need to sit and go, okay, what's preventing me from getting those grades? And they might be some weaknesses that you have that you can develop. So, is it that it's a weakness in your skills? Is it that you just haven't mastered something because you didn't actually do much of the homework on it and you didn't revise properly for the test? Is it that you did try, you did revise loads, but nothing went in? Maybe that's a weakness in your revision techniques and the way in which you revise, and that's something that you could work on in the future.

So, I think it's important, definitely we need to focus on strengths and weaknesses, but we need to kind of think about what's the purpose of what we're trying to do here to work out whether it's strengths or weaknesses you're going to look at more. So, weaknesses are really good for kind of self-reflection and long term where do I want to get to? What do I need to do to improve? And strengths are also really good for going well, okay, this is what I can offer and this is why I would be suited for X-Y-Z that I'm applying to or to the course that I'm choosing. So, yeah, you need to kind of judge a situation slightly.

Katie

Great. Thank you, Sarah. And lots of those things sort of involve just reflecting independently. But who else would be a good person to sort of talk to about these things?

Sarah

I'm really glad you asked this because identifying your strengths and weaknesses is not something that you should just do on your own. Number one, it can be quite a tricky thing to do, to sit and write about yourself or make a list about your qualities. Speak to someone who knows you really, really well. And this can generally be a very, very positive experience. If you've got your friends, if you asked your closest friends and said, well, what are my strengths? They might come up with a completely different list than the one that you have. You might just think you're a generally good friend, but you don't really know much else, they might say you are the best listener out of all of my friends, I know I can go to you with no judgment whatsoever of what I'm going to say and that you're going to help me and you might not realize that actually, compared to the other friends in the friendship group, that you stand out above others because you might just be doing something which to you, is very, very natural when you think, oh, everyone's like that, it's not anything particularly special. So, actually going and getting that feedback from others, so close friends, family members as well, absolutely.

If you've got parents, carers, guardians, they will know you very, very well, because they've known you for such a long time. So, they should be able to give some kind of feedback. Siblings maybe, depending on your relationship with your siblings. I mean, I'm imagining my relationship, I love my brother and sister now, we're very, very close but when we were growing up, we just fought all the time. And I'm imagining if I got up to them when I was 14 years old and say, can you tell me my strengths? They would have laughed in my face, probably told me everything they thought was wrong with me. That's just how brothers and sisters are. But if you are one of those lucky people and have lovely relationships with your brothers and sisters go with that.

And teachers as well, that's not just teachers in schools it might be trusted people that you might have in maybe extracurricular groups, you might have like dance teachers or singing teachers or football coaches or whatever it is. But people who know you and you feel can actually offer some kind of good assessment on you as a person. And I'm sure they will be very, very happy to help.

Katie

Yeah, and definitely someone you trust, isn't it?

Sarah

Yes. Absolutely.

Katie

Definitely. And if someone approaches you and sort of says what am I good at, what are my strengths and skills, what sort of questions can we use to help them? So, this is, I guess for parents, carers and guardians, what can they do or what can they say to the young person?

Sarah

Yes. So young persons approach them with this question and the first thing is to be positive, because it could well be that the young person may not have much confidence themselves in even asking the question. So, kind of recognized this is a great thing that you've done to come to me, to talk to me about, I'm really, really happy to help you. If you're focussing on the strengths, you could be identifying strengths that they haven't identified in themselves and they might have very little faith in it because if they haven't recognised it themselves, I'll use the example of a good listener, if they think I'm not that great listener, if the conversation ends there, they're not going to go away with that as a skill, so it's really important to say, well, yes you are, you want to be able to give them examples, do you remember when this happened? Do you remember when that happened? This is what you could have done, but this is what you naturally did, and that's what marks you out as a great listener. So, actually giving them examples to give themselves the confidence, yes, that is something about me I hadn't really considered before. In terms of where they might have weaknesses or skills they can improve on, obviously to do that in the most positive way, not in a critical way at all. And it could well be that your young person has identified something as a strength which you might not think is actually as strong as it could be. So, again, handling that in a positive way, not a case of kind of laughing at it and go, "no, you're not like that at all", it would be a case of saying, "well, yes, I think you do have elements of that as a strength, do you think there's any more you could do to improve that", and turning it into a positive conversation because it it's a difficult process they're going through and actually considering themselves as a person, it leaves them open to a lot of potential negativity or whatever they think is not a comfortable process to actually go through. So just bear that in mind, and I'm sure they'll really, really appreciate that help.

Katie

Thank you, Sarah. And you can almost, well, you can simply ask them: "so what do they enjoy doing? What is your favourite subject?"

Sarah

Yeah, of course. Because sometimes I might come to you and they don't have that list, they just say, I need to come up with something I can put into this application and they can't think, so yeah, talking about what do you enjoy at school, what are the ones you do well at, what are the things you enjoy doing outside of school? So, it could be extracurriculars, it could be in school, it could be skills and strengths you've developed if you've got a part time job. Have you shown your boss that you're somebody who can be trusted and could be responsible and personable and professional? So, yes, if you ask those questions, you might actually start getting those conversations going where then they can pull out those skills and strengths that they have.

Katie

Yeah. Thank you, Sarah. And we're now going to talk a little bit about some other tools that our listeners can use to identify their strengths and skills. And I wanted to talk a bit about the Johari window. Now, I'm not sure if you know much about this?

Sarah

It's not something I'm super familiar with.

Katie

No, that's absolutely fine. So, I can tell you a bit now. So, Johari window is fantastic. What I'm going to do is I'm going to link a video to this episode that you can look at it in more detail, but it is a tool to help you better understand yourself and discover how other people see you as well, and this model was created by psychologist Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham. And so that's why it's the Johari because it's Jo and Harri. And it's basically a square split into four squares to look like a window. So that's the second part of the name. And from watching it myself, I sort of was quite inspired by it, and I think I would sort of highly recommend our listeners to take a look at this video. You can simply Google it or look at it on YouTube but like I said, check out the link if you want to. And the window is sectioned off to help you identify strengths that you're aware of, strengths that you're not aware of, but other people are aware of, and then there's also this part of the square where you're not aware of these skills and other people aren't aware of these skills. And that's a quite intriguing sort of area, because then they're basically skills that haven't been discovered yet at all. And I also like the ones where you're not aware of the skills, like Sarah mentioned earlier, because then obviously things that come naturally to you, which is absolutely amazing, but then when you do recognize them, it's something you could build on even more. You perhaps can realize that that's something you might want to pursue in the future and also it's obviously confidence boosting as well. But yeah, I would definitely look at the Johari window and sort of have a think about those different areas and skills that you have because it's a great way to sort of boost you in those areas.

Sarah

That sounds really interesting. And what you've just highlighted there, is one of the many things out there and one of the many tools out there to help you identify your strengths. And it could well be that that really

works well for you and there could be another one which works well for you instead. The good thing about this, this area, if you are faced with this prospect – if you need to sit down and actually consider your strengths, your weaknesses, what you can do to improve in the future where you want to go in the future – is that there are so many things out there to help you.

So, your teachers no doubt might have some bits in school to actually encourage you to do this, but if you go online, you can actually Google how to identify my strengths and there are loads of activities out there. A few of my favourite ones that I was hoping to share today, so, there is the simple thing of kind of just writing your own list, to sit and write it all down, I'm a list person. And the other way you can do is actually start with a list, you can actually go online and find a list of character attributes, a list of strengths, a list of skills and you can actually go through and assess yourself and almost tick off like, yeah, that suits me, or, no, that doesn't sound like me. And it might give you words that you might never have considered before. So, I've got a list of some of them here, so, they'll be, we kind of think of the most obvious ones which come to mind, but things like cooperative, are you a cooperative person? Are you a genuine person? Can you be persuasive? Do you have skills like being able to kind of bring people round to your point of view? Can you use your communication for that way? Are you a motivated person? Are you an open-minded person? They're all lovely words that I think actually when we stop, when we think about ourselves, they don't immediately come to mind. So, maybe actually go and look at the different kind of strengths and skills out there and see which of these describes me and you can build up your list that way.

Another exercise, which I really, really like is rather than focussing on you now, so, looking at your list and going, yes, that's me, think about what it is you want to do in the future, think of you as your most ideal self in the future. It could be a particular job or particularly university you're at, or it could be, I don't know, just a general lifestyle that you want. Imagine that future you and then think about all the strengths and skills this person has to have to be in that position. And then you can start thinking about, okay, what is it I might need to work on, what is it I might need to develop to actually get to that stage? So, I'll use another example. Say you're thinking, I'd love to be a doctor in the future. I really want to be a doctor. Well, they need a whole host of strengths and skills to get to that stage and also to maintain that profession. So, a doctor needs to be organized, they need to be determined, detail oriented, a good listener. They need to have a strong capacity and determination to learn, they need to be a good communicator, they need to be hardworking, diligent, team working. They also need to be able to help and need help from others, this going back to the weaknesses thing, you get specialist doctors, and they're specialists in their field, but they don't know about other fields and sometimes they need to actually consult friends or colleagues who say, actually, I've got this case can you help me with this? Because I don't have that knowledge. And the openness to be able to do that is, again, another skill that's essential of a doctor. So, you could come up with this list and then think, okay, does that sound like the person that I could be? Have I got things here that I could develop? Could I develop some of these soft skills, maybe with perseverance and guidance from others? And that is a way to help identify what it is you need to do to improve, but also highlights, yes, that's me, I am a good communicator, I know I can work well in a team, so yes, maybe this is the right path for me. So that might be something that our listeners want to consider, Katie.

Katie

That's fantastic. I love that. That tool I can imagine that's quite motivational.

Sarah

It is, and it's not as hard, I personally and people might disagree, but personally, I find it easier to sit and write the strengths and skills of an imaginary person than a real person, than the real me. I find it easier to actually think about that imaginary me and these things that I'd like to be able to do and these things that I'd like to have and then it kind of gives me a purpose to think about, where am I on that journey? Where am I going? Am I near there? What do I need to do to improve?

Katie

Yeah, thank you, Sarah. And as well as that, you've got these free aptitude tests that you can do online as well. Like a quiz to discover your strengths and weaknesses and you can simply just google the words strengths aptitude test to find one of the many quizzes on there, and it might really help you to discover something that you didn't know about yourself, which is obviously very positive.

Sarah

It really is. And going back to that whole boost, that personal boost, and you come away actually going, oh, I learned something about myself today and it was a good thing and it's something I'll remember about myself.

Katie

And I think it makes the whole process a little bit more enjoyable as well, if you're applying for university or a job application and it can be quite lengthy, you are writing several drafts, but if you're suddenly writing about things, you're thinking, oh, I'm good at this, I'm good at that, if you turn it around, you think, oh, okay, I've just written my statement already.

Sarah

Exactly, and I think also having that confidence when you're doing that thing, that will come through in what you're writing and at the end of the process, if you don't end up getting the place that you wanted, if you don't end up getting the job that you wanted, at least you've actually had that process of going, yeah, but I know that I gave it my all and I know that I'm a good person, and I know that I'm a strong candidate and that just wasn't the right place for me, but I know I've got skills and strengths I can offer elsewhere.

Katie

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. So, by identifying them during sort of self-reflection exercises or using tests and speaking to someone you trust can really help to provide you with those answers and give you a really good confidence boost as well. But it not only helps you as a person, but it can help you work in a team as

well, because with those strengths and weaknesses obviously not everyone has the same strengths or the same weaknesses, so it helps to balance it out.

Sarah

Yeah, I mean, Katie and I are colleagues, we work together in a team and knowing each other's strengths and weaknesses within our team is great. We've got one colleague who is amazing at kind of creative writing and she's very good at writing a lot of the things that go out to the schools and students we work with, and making it sound really wonderful. We've got others who are great at making presentations and also in skills in certain areas. I particularly enjoy talking about student finance and so I tend to get a lot of the student finance things my way, but then there are other topics I'd really rather somebody else dealt with and we've got someone else in the team who will do that. So that's another real good bonus to working collaboratively when you're looking at strengths and weaknesses.

Katie

Yes. Thank you so much, Sarah.

Sarah

You are very welcome.

Katie

If you got anything final you wanted to add.

Sarah

I think it's just a case of hopefully, I'm hoping the listeners feel quite excited and quite motivated after listening to this, and I'm hoping that we've broken down a few of those misconceptions that might sound like a bit of a dull exercise. I'm feeling really positive after just talking about such a positive topic.

Katie

Yeah I want to use one of the exercises and do it myself.

Sarah

And also, just a case of wishing anyone who might be listening to this, for any personal statement or job application, wishing them the very best of luck with that, and knowing that actually you can identify things by yourself and is a lifelong thing. You can do this when you're at school, you do it at university and you can make those changes and learn those skills and develop those strengths. And it's a really positive, important thing to do, and focussing on weaknesses is not a weak thing to do, it's a very strong thing to do. So, yes, just wishing you the best of luck with it.

Katie

Thank you, Sarah. And if you wanted to check out the Johari window, please take a look at the YouTube video that I'll be linking in the comments. And if you're a registered listener, you'll receive all of the links to resources to help you identify your strengths and skills. Thank you again.

Sarah

Thank you.

Katie

Thank you for listening to today's episode. If you want to listen to more, our previous episodes are available on the playlist and you can keep an eye out for new releases by making sure you're a registered listener. Please email us on outreach@essex.ac.uk to find out more.

We've recently launched a variety of fantastic online courses for students to support their transition, independence and a variety of skills at such an important time in their lives. Made up of short videos, interactive activities and resources, the modules aim to provide students with the confidence to succeed. Our courses include the Further Studies Preparation Programme for students in years 10-11, University Preparation Programme for students in years 12-13 and Essex Preparation Programme for those about to embark on their journey here at Essex. Head to essex.ac.uk/schools-and-colleges to enrol today.

Thanks again and don't forget to share the episode with your family, friends, and colleagues.